

Investigating the Potential Effect of Race and Culture on Preservice Teachers' Perceptions of Corporal Punishment and Its Subsequent Effect on Mandated Reporting

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Abstract: In the United States, not only are parents permitted to utilize corporal punishment in disciplining their children, but 19 states still permit the use of corporal punishment in schools. Teachers are legally bound to report suspected maltreatment, yet their school may engage in a discipline practice which they may consider abuse. This potential conflict depends on the teacher's definition of "acceptable" physical discipline and abuse. Thus, teachers' attitudes towards corporal punishment and child maltreatment are critical. Preservice teachers were surveyed about their attitudes towards corporal punishment, knowledge of child maltreatment and mandated reporting, personal experiences with corporal punishment and asked to rate several hypothetical parent-child discipline scenarios. Preliminary analyses indicate that despite a higher endorsement of and more personal experience with corporal punishment, African American participants did not differ from their Anglo counterparts in their ratings of parental discipline scenarios. These and other findings will be discussed.

Introduction

Despite condemnation from numerous national and international child development experts, corporal punishment is still a fact of life for children living in the U.S. The majority of children in the U.S. will experience physical punishment at the hands of their parents by adolescence (Gershoff, 2010). This phenomenon is not unique to the U.S. as the use of corporal punishment is an international issue. For example, Australian law permits parents to use "reasonable" corporal punishment in disciplining their children and only four of the seven territories have explicitly prohibited corporal punishment (Australia Institute of Family Studies, 2017).

Research in the U.S. showing a decline in favorable attitudes towards corporal punishment indicates changing attitudes, yet it is unclear whether changes in attitudes equals a change in practice (Taillieu, et al, 2014). It is possible that the significant decline in substantiated cases of child maltreatment (Finklehor & Jones, 2006) is also evidence of a decline in the incidence of physical discipline. Many contend that there is a link between physical discipline and physical abuse; positing them as opposite ends of a continuum of physical punishment

(Wallat, 2017; Rodriguez, & Sutherland 1999). Given that the line between physical discipline and abuse are somewhat subjective, the decline in substantiated cases does not necessarily mean a decline in incidence of corporal punishment. Rather it may mean that the threshold of acceptable physical discipline has changed.

There is a well-documented relationship between parental use of corporal punishment and higher rates of externalizing behavior problems in children (Alampay et al, 2017; Gershoff, 2002; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Straus, 2001), which includes aggressive and antisocial behaviors (Gershoff, et al, 2012). This effect has been found to be more pronounced when the parent inflicting the punishment has a history of violence and/or abuse (Cicchetti, et al, 1992). Although the association is strong, the causal mechanism is still the subject of debate. Whether it is the act of physical punishment or the sometimes-concomitant lack of parental warmth, low parental involvement or outright rejection which leads to the externalizing behavior problems or simply methodological errors in the research is still unclear (Landsford et al., 2005).

One common criticism of research on the use of corporal punishment is that it has been carried out with mainly middle-class Anglo families (Lansford, et al, 2004). Thus, findings from studies with limited samples are, by their very nature, limited in their generalizability. When research is carried out with a more racially diverse sample, the adverse psychological and behavioral effects are limited to Anglo, European American children (Deater-Deckard, et al, 2003).

Overall, parents across racial, ethnic, and cultural groups who view corporal punishment as an appropriate and effective discipline method are more likely to use it in disciplining their children (Fish, et al, 2006). However, physical punishment is reported as being more culturally accepted in various communities such as within African American communities (Lorber, et al, 2011). African American parents view corporal punishment as an appropriate and effective discipline method and thus, are more likely to use it in disciplining their children (Friedson, 2016; Gershoff, 2002)

Research on the links between the use of corporal punishment on children and adverse outcomes such as aggression, delinquency, and criminality have largely ignored the role of race, culture and cultural expectations in mediating the negative impact of physical discipline. Taylor, et al (2011) suggest, "it is possible that the link between corporal punishment and risk for poor child outcomes might be moderated by factors such as race/ethnicity and situational or normative context" (p.60). Hence, the deleterious effects of corporal punishment may be moderated by the cultural context in which it occurs (Gershoff et. al., 2012).

Corporal Punishment in Schools

Further complicating the issue of corporal punishment in the U.S., is the fact that 19 states still permit the use of corporal punishment in schools. This discipline technique, while not often used in schools, still results in tens of thousands of emergency room visits each year (Wasserman, 2011). Those in favor of its use claim it is an effective means of controlling student behavior that may put themselves and others in danger (Robinson et al. 2005). While others argue that it teaches children that violence is an acceptable option for dealing with problems, and that it is not an effective method of disciplining children (Farmer & Stinson, 2010). The majority of schools where corporal punishment is still used lie in the southern part of the U.S. One study found more positive attitudes towards the use of corporal punishment and a

less strong feeling of urgency for abolishing it from teachers in schools in southern states as compared to teachers in other areas of the U.S. (Robinson, et al, 2005).

If corporal punishment is permitted in a school, teachers who bared hold favorable views of it may face a conflict between their personal attitudes and school policy towards discipline. Additionally, dissimilar views as to the appropriateness of corporal punishment may create a conflict between a teacher's responsibilities and duties as a legally mandated reporter of child maltreatment and the school system through which they will most likely channel their report. Strong anti-corporal punishment attitudes may predispose a teacher to view certain acts of physical discipline as abuse. Conversely, it is possible that teachers, with more accepting attitudes towards corporal punishment, may see certain acts of physical discipline, which others may view as abusive, as acceptable. This issue is even further complicated as what constitutes "acceptable" physical punishment or abuse is vague or undefined. Past studies have found that professionals carry their personal perceptions of child maltreatment into their professional lives (Chan, et al, 2002). Thus, teachers from cultures different than their students may encounter difficulties as their personal beliefs come into conflict with the parental discipline practices their students experience and/or the disciplinary practices of their school. As developing teachers, preservice teachers are in a position of learning their professional obligations while navigating their personal beliefs and prior experiences. Perceptions, beliefs, and legal expectations of corporal punishment and child maltreatment is the focus of the inquiry herein. Given research has found potential racial, cultural, and socioeconomic influences on views about corporal punishment, such factors are further considered.

Method

Sample and Procedure

Fifty-one preservice teachers took part in this study where they completed surveys about their feelings towards corporal punishment in the home and in schools, their own personal history with corporal punishment, their general knowledge about child abuse and neglect, and their responsibilities as mandated reporters of suspected child maltreatment. Participants were also asked to rate nine hypothetical parental discipline scenarios. Participants also rated hypothetical parent-child discipline vignettes.

Participants were recruited from a developmental psychology class at a large urban university in the southeastern U.S. Participation in the study was voluntary and there were no exclusion criteria. For successful completion of the study instruments, participants earned 5-point extra-credit points, while non-participants could earn the same points with an alternative assignment. Ninety-six percent of those recruited agreed to participate. After informed consent was obtained, participants completed the study instruments.

Participants were primarily female (96%), 42% African American, 38% Anglo and 20% Asian. The ages of the participants ranged from 20-35 years with an average age of 22.8 (4.6) years. Differences attributable to racial group membership was a key focus of this study and as certain racial groups are over-represented in lower SES groups in the U.S., it was necessary to partial out variance associated with SES. Thus, SES was controlled in all statistical analyses. Relationships between socio-economic status (SES) and the acceptance of corporal punishment has been found in several studies (Bornstein, et al, 2003; Hemenway, et al, 1994). Parents across racial groups from lower SES groups have been found more likely to use some form of physical punishment than are parents from higher SES groups. African American s report more use of

corporal punishment than other racial groups (Deater-Deckard, et al, 2003). Thus, it was critical to partial out the independent effects of race and SES (Vittrup & Holden, 2009) by controlling for SES in all data analyses. Additionally, attitudes towards corporal punishment are most likely formed in childhood, so information was gathered in relation to their family of origin.

Instruments

Demographics and Hollingshead Four-Factor Index of Socioeconomic Status (HFFISS).

Participants completed a questionnaire in which they indicated their age, gender, race, marital status, and the number of children in their current household. In addition, information about their parents' level of educational attainment and occupation was collected.

This information was then coded utilizing the formula for the Hollingshead Four-Factor Index of Socioeconomic Status (Hollingshead, 1975). The Hollingshead provides a more complete index of SES by examining not only occupation, but also educational level.

The marital status, occupation, highest level of education obtained and occupational prestige of each parent was coded. Educational attainment was given a score from 1-7 with a higher score indicating higher educational attainment. Occupation was assigned a score from 1-9 depending on the societal prestige associated with the specific occupation. A higher score indicated greater prestige. If the participant was raised in a two-parent home, information for both parents is used to calculate the SES score. If the participant only lived with one parent, only information for that parent is entered. The potential range of index scores is from 8 to a maximum of 66 (Hollingshead, 1975).

Corporal Punishment Scale (CPS).

A measure created by Bogacki, et al (2005) was used to measure attitudes toward physical discipline and the use of such techniques in schools. As the sample is comprised of pre-service teachers, the CPS is an appropriate measure as it captures attitudes about corporal punishment use by parents, but also about its use in schools. Twenty-nine items comprised this measure assessing attitudes towards the use of corporal punishment at home and in the classroom or school setting. It included items such as, "If you spare the rod, you will spoil the child", "Since teachers act "in loco parentis"(in place of parents) they should be permitted to physically punish a student" and "The teacher's first responsibility in all cases of misconduct is to locate and punish the offender.". Items were scored using a 1-4 scale, 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (mildly disagree), 3 (neither agree nor disagree), 4 (mildly agree) or 5 (strongly agree). Factor analysis by the author of this measure yielded one factor accounting for 88% of the variance. Thus, scores were added and could potentially range from 29-141. The lower the score the more negative attitudes the respondent held. A reliability coefficient alpha of .87 was found in this study.

Educators Child Abuse Questionnaire (ECAQ).

The participants' knowledge of child maltreatment, their knowledge about reporting procedures, and their overall attitudes towards corporal punishment was assessed using the Educators Child

Abuse Questionnaire (ECAQ). Again, this measure is particularly suited to this sample of pre-service teachers because it combines questions about child abuse and neglect in general as well with questions about the duties and responsibilities of mandated reporters. Developed by Kenny (2004), this questionnaire asked respondents to indicate their agreement to 12 statements related to their knowledge of and competence in identifying child maltreatment as well as their knowledge of mandated reporting. Ratings ranged from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. The measure yields four subscales, (1) Awareness of the signs and symptoms of the various forms of child maltreatment, (2) Knowledge of reporting procedures, (3) Attitudes towards discipline in the home and at school and (4) Beliefs about the seriousness of child abuse.

Corporal Punishment Experiences (CPE)

To assess the impact of lived corporal punishment on the participants' current attitudes towards corporal punishment, child maltreatment and ratings of parental discipline techniques, a survey was created by the researcher to assess retrospective accounts of corporal punishment received in childhood. Participants were presented with a list of 8 types of physical punishment ranging in severity from being physically restrained in a chair, to being thrown or knocked down. Participants indicated how often each type of corporal punishment occurred to them during childhood. A Likert-type scale was used, never (0), once or twice (1), occasionally (2), frequently (3), almost every day (4). To capture the frequency and severity of lived corporal punishment the increasingly severe types of physical punishments were weighted. Thus, each frequency score was multiplied by the weight of the particular type of physical punishment. The total CPE total score was computed by summing the frequency scores (frequency x weight) of all types of physical punishment. Scores ranged from "0" to "144" with a higher score indicating a more frequent and more severe type of physical punishment experience.

Discipline Vignettes

Participants responses to nine vignettes of hypothetical parent-child discipline encounters created by Smith, et al (2007) were assessed. These 9 vignettes included three different levels of physical discipline and three levels of child transgressions. Examples of mild, moderate and severe transgressions and discipline techniques comprised the 9 vignettes. Mild discipline included gently taking the child by the arm, while moderate discipline involved spanking with a bare hand. Slapping the child in the face with a bare hand was considered a severe discipline technique. Mild transgressions involved the child accidentally knocking over another child. The moderate and severe transgression involved intentional behavior by the child with the moderate transgression involving behaviors in which another child was knocked down. The severe transgression an attack, leaving the victim with a black eye. All vignettes involved a mother and her 7-year old male child and had the respondent assume the role of an uninvolved bystander to the interaction.

Upon completion of each vignette, participants rated the severity of the child's transgression, the severity of the discipline technique used by the mother, and the appropriateness and effectiveness of the discipline used. These dimensions were rated on a 6-point Likert-type scale. Subsequently, the respondent then rated abusiveness of the parent-child

encounter using 6-point Likert-type scale where (1) for “not at all abusive” and (6) for extremely abusive.

Data Analysis

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of key variables. Correlational analysis was conducted to investigate associations between CPS total scores, the four subscales of the ECAQ and scores on the CPE. Multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was used to examine significant differences between the racial (1) scores on the CPS, (2) scores on the four subscales of the ECAQ), (3) scores on the CPE and (4) ratings of the parent-child discipline vignettes. MANCOVA was utilized as a majority of the variables of interest were normally distributed across the racial groups analyzed (Shapiro Wilk $p > .05$). The independent variable was the participants’ race. Due to the low number of Asian participants compared to the two other racial groups, the MANCOVA only compared African American and Anglo participants. Family of origin SES was a covariate in all analyses. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 23 program was utilized for all statistical analyses. The Least Significant Differences Pairwise Multiple Comparison test was utilized in all post-hoc analyses.

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
CMAS Aware	12.8235	1.64567
CMAS Support	16.3529	1.77565
CMAS Corporal	9.1373	1.66156
CMAS Serious	2.8039	.69339
Corporal Punishment Scale Total	69.8824	17.68462
Hollingshead SES	39.2353	14.42545
Corporal Punishment Experiences	30.0784	19.33995

TABLE 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Target Variables

Results

Family of Origin SES

Participants’ family of origin SES ranged from 13-63.5 with a mean of 39.2 (14.4). Most participants’ family of origin SES were in the second, third and fourth level of Hollingshead 4-factor index. The rest of the scores were in the lowest (5%) and highest (7%) strata.

Descriptive Statistics and Correlational Analysis

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics of the main variables. Results of the correlational analysis revealed two significant correlations found between the total score on the CPS and the corporal punishment subscale of the ECAQ ($r=.62, p< 0.001$) and the CPS total and the total score on the CPE ($r=.38, p=.008$). As scores on the CPS and the corporal punishment subscale of the ECAQ both measured attitudes towards corporal punishment, there was the possibility that issues of collinearity may preclude their use in the MANCOVA. However, the correlation coefficient of these variables did not approach the level for which issues of multicollinearity should be considered (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2012).

Preservice Teachers' Race and Attitudes towards Corporal Punishment

The MANCOVA revealed significant main effects of racial group on preservice teachers' attitudes toward corporal punishment. Participants differed by racial group on scores on the CPS after controlling for SES, $F(1, 51) = 6.9, p = .012$, partial $\eta^2 = .18$. Post-hoc tests revealed that the scores of African American participants were significantly higher than Anglo participants (Mean difference = 13.13, $p = .012$) participants. Results also indicated a significant effect of racial group on the subscale of the ECAQ which measured attitudes towards corporal punishment at home and in school after controlling for SES, $F(1, 51) = 5.69, p = .022$, partial $\eta^2 = .17$. Post-hoc tests revealed that the scores of African American participants were significantly higher than Anglo participants (Mean difference = 1.23, $p = .022$) participants. Finally, an additional racial difference was found with the subscale of the ECAQ that measures perceived support in the role of mandated child maltreatment reporter after controlling for SES, $F(1, 51) = 7.69, p = .008$, partial $\eta^2 = .17$. Post-hoc tests revealed that the scores of African American participants were significantly higher than Anglo participants (Mean difference = 1.43, $p = .008$).

Preservice Teachers' Race and Corporal Punishment Experiences in Childhood

Racial differences were found on the CPE total score after controlling for SES, $F(1, 51) = 6.92, p = .021$, partial $\eta^2 = .19$. Post-hoc tests revealed that the score of African American participants were significantly higher than Anglo participants (Mean difference = 15.91, $p = .021$).

Preservice Teachers' Race and Their Ratings of Parental Discipline

MANCOVA also found no significant effects of race on any of the ratings of the vignettes which included the mild discipline technique (taking the child gently by the arm). However, significant effects were found on the racial groups' ratings of the appropriateness, effectiveness and abusiveness of the moderate and severe discipline technique, used in the rest of the vignettes (three and three respectively).

In the vignette, which included a mild transgression and moderate discipline technique (mother spans the child on the buttocks with her hand), African American participants rated the discipline in this vignette (boy accidentally runs into another child) as less severe than did the

Anglo participants after controlling for SES, $F(1, 51) = 7.6, p = .009$, partial $\eta^2 = .16$. Post-hoc tests revealed that the scores of African American participants were significantly lower than Anglo participants (Mean difference = .55, $p = .009$) participants. Additionally, African American participants rated the discipline technique used in this vignette as more abusive than did the Anglo participants after controlling for SES, $F(1, 51) = 13.39, p = .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .26$. Post-hoc tests revealed that the scores of African American participants were significantly higher than Anglo participants (Mean difference = 1.04, $p = .001$) participants. Further differences were found in the vignette which included a moderate transgression and moderate discipline technique. African American participants, after controlling for SES, ranked this discipline technique as more appropriate, $F(1, 51) = 6.36, p = .016$, partial $\eta^2 = .14$, effective, $F(1, 51) = 5.42, p = .025$, partial $\eta^2 = .13$, and more abusive, $F(1, 51) = 4.61, p = .038$, partial $\eta^2 = .11$ than did the Anglo participants. A single significant difference was found in the vignette that included a severe transgression and a moderate discipline technique. African American participants rated this discipline technique as more effective $F(1, 51) = 4.75, p = .035$, partial $\eta^2 = .11$.

Significant differences were also found in the vignettes in which the parent utilized the most severe discipline technique (mother slaps child across the face with the back of her hand). In all three of these vignettes, African American participants rated this discipline as more effective than did the Anglo participants ($F(1, 51) = 7.06, p = .011$, partial $\eta^2 = .15$; $F(1, 51) = 9.75, p = .003$, partial $\eta^2 = .20$; $F(1, 51) = 8.92, p = .005$, partial $\eta^2 = .19$). No other significant differences were found with these vignettes.

Discussion

Findings from this study add significantly to our understanding of the effects of corporal punishment experiences in childhood. The addition of a variable assessing experiences with corporal punishment in childhood contributed to the discussion by adding another potentially significant factor involved in the relationship between attitudes towards corporal punishment, child maltreatment and mandated reporting.

African American participants were more accepting of the use of physical punishment as a discipline technique compared to the Anglo participants. In addition, they experienced corporal punishment more often and with greater severity in childhood. Neither finding was particularly surprising as these differences are well documented in the literature (Bornstein, et al, 2003). However, differences found between the African American and Anglo participants in ratings of the hypothetical discipline scenarios is more difficult to interpret.

In scenarios, which included moderate and severe forms of physical discipline, African American participants rated some of them as more effective and appropriate compared to Anglo participants, yet with one exception, ratings of abusiveness did not differ between the two groups. African American participants rated spanking a child who accidentally runs into another child as more abusive than did Anglo participants. It is possible that the accidental (versus intentional) nature of the offense prompted African American participants to view such a reaction as unnecessarily extreme, leading to a higher abusiveness rating compared to Anglo participants. Yet, in three scenarios which varied in the severity of the child's transgression and included the parent striking the child across the face with the back of the hand (the most severe discipline technique), African American participants rated this technique as more effective, yet also believed that it was as abusive as did their Anglo counterparts.

This suggests that the African American participants in this sample were able to simultaneously hold views of certain discipline techniques as both effective and abusive. In essence, it is possible that African American participants could compartmentalize ideas about the effectiveness of a particular discipline technique separately from their judgment of its abusiveness. The basis for such a conclusion, in many ways, rest in the social norms that construct what “counts” as abuse and perceived effectiveness. For instance, if the normative view is shaped by Anglo middle-class values and standards, such is the case in the U.S., then interpretations based on racial differences, in this case Anglo and African American, may appear contradictory for African Americans in an Anglo norm, aligned for Anglos, as possibly evidenced herein (Chan, et al, 2002).

Research and commentary have examined the nature of parental discipline and perceptions of abuse. In these instances, discussion focuses on how cultural and social mores shape what constitutes abuse and appropriate disciplinary strategies enforced by parents. In other words, punishment might be acceptable in one context or viewed as reprehensible in another. As such, a universal definition of abuse is illusive (IOM & NRC, 2014). Research also points to the perceptions of abusive treatment of children is often calibrated by the normative views within a particular context. Thomas and Dettlaff (2011) argue that African American s’ use of stricter, physical discipline will prepare their children for the harsh realities of living in a society with racial discrimination and bias. African American mothers in Taylor, et al’s (2011) study stressed opting to use corporal punishment when potential danger or risk was high for their child. Thus, harsher physical discipline is seen as more necessarily normative and even adaptive in African American families. This more utilitarian view of corporal punishment in the African American community may help explain the seemingly contradictory views of the severe discipline technique as both effective and abusive. However, as mandated reporters, regardless of cultural or racial affiliation, policy and practice dictate an expected response that reflects the established anticipated norms, which are inculcated socially (and via policies) by the dominant group (Chan, et al, 2002). Bluestone’s (2005) research suggests:

[E]xperiences of punishment that were not appraised as abusive or harsh are more likely to be evaluated as appropriate. The possible implication here is that as professionals, by law, they may be required to report as abuse behaviors that they experienced and continue to label as ‘appropriate discipline’ (p. 244).

[Emphasis in original]

Furthermore, research conducted within the legal system on reports of abuse substantiates that cultural and social contexts play a significant role in perceiving, reporting, and using corporal punishment (Lansford, 2010; Renteln, 2010). Practices positioned as normative as a result of personal history, cultural, or social standards are likely to be understood or viewed as acceptable, thereby underscoring that views regarding corporal punishment may evoke contrasting personal and legal expectations with respect to mandated reporting.

Despite the social and cultural dynamics of the racial groups in this study are unique to the U.S., there are implications of this research which can be applied to an international setting. Issues around the effects of acculturation into the dominant culture and the idea of varying or dual identities as an adaptive means of functioning in the larger society are applicable in any culture with dominant and minority cultures.

The findings from this study while illuminating, must be interpreted cautiously. Limitations of the study restrict the generalizability of the findings to the general population of preservice teachers. First, although widely used, retrospective accounts of childhood experiences

with corporal punishment may be as much a reflection of how one has processed discipline events from childhood as an accurate recollection of actual events (McDonald & Martinez, 2016). Secondly, the effect sizes in many of the differences found are relatively small and although a small effect size does not invalidate the findings, it does suggest that other factors are also responsible for differences found.

Additionally, the Corporal Punishment Experiences instrument used in this study is new and although it did account for both severity and frequency of corporal punishment in childhood, more testing of this measure is necessary before it can be deemed reliable and valid. With this in mind, the CPE scores of participants were low considering the possible range of this measure, indicating a relatively low level of corporal punishment experienced by the participants. Thus, findings may be different give a sample which experienced more severe and more frequent physical punishment in childhood.

Given that this study utilized surveys, it is impossible to know the context in which participants viewed the hypothetical scenarios. Although gendered responses were mitigated by the consistent profile of male boy, and mother, how respondents conceptualized the racial dynamics within the scenario may have some bearing on the outcome to consider.

Despite these limitations, this study has provided additional support for existing beliefs about attitudes towards corporal punishment and race, while also highlighting the role of culture and family of origin experiences with corporal punishment and the intersection of these with the disciplinary practices of schools.

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